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ABSTRACT

Ag-Ed is an agricultural education project aimed at upper primary students, held in conjunction with the Toowoomba Show (similar to a county fair) in Queensland, Australia. The program achieves its purpose of helping children understand the impact and relevance that agriculture has on their everyday lives through two components, an Ag-Ed day and a teacher resource package. The Ag-Ed day component involves classes in interactive agricultural presentations on the first 2 days of the Toowoomba Show. Teachers from schools up to 250 kilometers away book their classes into 4 agricultural presentations from a list of 20. The 20-minute presentations are organized and conducted by industry representatives, who understand that they are providing an educational experience, not marketing their products. The teacher resource package contains 13 sections of information and activities that supplement the industry presentations. The material is designed for use by teachers in the classroom for lead-up and follow-up sessions. The material is reviewed and critiqued by industry representatives, and exposes students to the full scope of the business of agriculture. Teachers are provided with evaluation sheets so they can critique the package. The package is sent free of charge to 200 schools within a radius of 1.5 hours drive from Toowoomba, but it travels a good bit further as a result of word-of-mouth referrals. Winner of the 1997 Australian Rural Education Award, the program has been tremendously successful at providing an interesting, experiential, interactive curriculum. (TD)

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Winner of the 1997 **Australian Rural Education Award** -
accepted by Ms Judy Lindley
of Toowoomba, Queensland.

WHAT IS AG-ED?

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RC 021 954

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WHAT IS AG-ED?

As the name suggests, Ag-Ed is an agricultural education project which we have aimed at upper primary students. During the last three years Ag-Ed has been held in conjunction with the Toowoomba Show.

We call Ag-Ed a 'classroom without walls' experience. Ag-Ed aims to help children gain an understanding of the impact and relevance agriculture has on their every day lives.

Ag-Ed has two components:

a) An Ag-Ed day which involves children in their class groups participating in four interactive agricultural presentations; and
b) A teacher resource package.

a) In 1995 and 1996 Ag-Ed day was held on Wednesday, the first day of the Toowoomba Show. However, this year, due to a substantial increase in numbers of children wanting to attend, Ag-Ed was held on two days. As in previous years, the children came from Toowoomba schools and schools up to 250 kms away. Teachers booked their classes into four agricultural presentations from a list of 20. These were agricultural machinery and technology, beef cattle - the basics, beef auction, bees and beekeeping, cotton, dairy, energy in agriculture, farm safety, fruit and vegetables, grains, horses, landcare - the basics, landcare - trees and forests, medicinal herbs, pigs, poultry, sheep, water, weeds and wool.

I'll deviate for a minute to briefly describe the Toowoomba showgrounds. They are located on the western boundary of the city and comprise 150 undulating hectares. Architecturally designed buildings and pavilions nestling in the hills give the grounds a rural look and feel. Adjacent to the grounds are small farms, adding to the rural atmosphere.

Presentations occur at different sites throughout the grounds. For example, pigs are located in the pig pavilion, wool in the sheep pavilion, dairy cattle in the cattle pavilion. Other presentations take place in general pavilions, or tents erected in strategic positions, such as proximity to appropriate resources, water stations and conveniences.

Beginning at 9:30 am, presentations are timetabled to commence on the half hour, every half hour with the last one concluding at 2:30 pm. (During the three years of Ag-Ed every presentation has been fully booked for the entire day which means the presenters are flat out without a break and are usually exhausted by the end of the day. One presenter spent a week in bed, on her back, after this year's Show.)
Presentations last 15-20 minutes which enables departing groups time to find their next presentation and arriving groups time to settle in.

This year, Lee and I included a resource tent, a facility which teachers could use during rest periods. It was manned by a teacher and student teacher, both with backgrounds in Ag-Science. As well as offering the teachers who came to the tent that desperately needed a cuppa, they were also available to discuss the plethora of resources we had gathered which pertained to those industries represented of Ag-Ed day.

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b) This is the Teacher Resource Package. It contains 13 sections of information and activities which supplement the industry presentations. The material is designed to be used by teachers in the classroom should they plan lead-up and follow-up sessions with their classes. In most sections we indicate how the material can be used across the curriculum. By February next year Lee and I will have added sections on soil, water, weeds, agricultural machinery and technology and some fruit and vegetables. We will also update medicinal herbs and grains.

By the way, the dog on the front cover is our mascot, Ed, who pops up on nearly every page of the package. He is also on the industry presentation signs erected at each site.

Writing sections of the Teacher Resource Package is a very time consuming exercise. Once we have written what we consider to be pretty good stuff, we send drafts to at least three people within each industry. They critically appraise our work, as it often contains inaccuracies and outdated information. We re-write, send the improved version off again, and keep our fingers crossed that we've got it right! It is then printed and illustrated.

Included in the Package is an Ag-Ed agricultural information and resource directory, which was compiled by Lee and which is updated each year. Teachers and students can refer to the directory if they need to source further information on any of the industries participating in Ag-Ed day. The directory lists all current publications and web sites.

The Package is sent free of charge to 200 schools within a radius of 1 1/2 hours drive from Toowoomba. It seems the Package draws many of the teachers to Ag-Ed, and it is the teachers who refer the Package to their colleagues. Thus it travels a good deal further than our limited radius and often ends up in extraordinary places!

Ag-Ed does not patronise children with the 'you kids should be grateful to farmers who work hard to put food in your belly and clothes on your back' story. Neither is it a tool to promote commodity groups and products or a romantic lifestyle. Rather, it affords students who we must remember are tomorrow's decision makers, the opportunity to examine the paddock to product processes of our food and fibre systems, the sustainability issues that support them and co-dependence of urban rural dwellers. In essence - the business of agriculture.

Therefore Ag-Ed is not just a programme for children from non-rural backgrounds. Teachers from country schools have embraced Ag-Ed in an attempt to show their students the 'big picture of agriculture'. Some of these teachers are concerned that many children from their schools, by following the trend of leaving school at age 15 to work on the family farm, will know little else other than what Dad does. (After visiting Ag-Ed for the first time, a teacher from the Emu Vale School mentioned to us that her students who came to Ag-Ed day thinking they knew it all admitted to her their surprise at how much they had learned.)

The business of agriculture does not stop when the raw product leaves the farm gate. Rather it involves an entire network of people - a little like the ripple effect when a stone is dropped into water - with the farmer being the stone. There are trucks which need re-fuelling and servicing, silos, gins, processing plants which need to be built and maintained, tractors always seem to need spare parts, on-farm workers such as shearers and harvesters, then there are people more in the background, yet still providing essential services - agronomists, veterinary surgeons, economists, scientists, food technologist and let's not forget the lecturers at universities who teach these professions. The list is endless- even without starting on the horse industry which incidentally is the biggest employer of people in Toowoomba.

Consequently, despite the very low percentage of Australian population being primary producers, there are vast numbers of ripple out there (and ripples have families) to prove that agriculture has a significant impact on our lives.

The fact that agriculture meets our basic needs of food, shelter and warmth, that currently the media is pursuing topics such as native title claims, drought relief, gun control, el nino, conservation, the hole in the ozone layer, global warming and teenage suicide means that the sustainability issues of agriculture impact on the lives of urban and rural dwellers as well. This is recognised by the Ag-Ed committee and we have encompassed landcare, water and soil conservation, the planting of trees and forests, weed control and farm safety as part of the Ag-Ed learning experience.

TO WHAT DOES AG-ED OWE ITS SUCCESS?

There are several contributing factors to the success of Ag-Ed. Firstly, we have received enthusiastic support from industry. I need to mention here that a few industry groups initially perceived Ag-Ed as a vehicle for promotion of their products, and who can blame them? However, with some gentle guidance from us they came round to putting into practice our philosophy of providing an educational experience, to light a spark of enthusiasm and interest in each child. If industry blatantly marketed their product during the presentations they would lose the interest of the students and the support of the teachers. (That a child may leave Ag-Ed day having understood only one fact about only one of the industry presentations he/she is a mark of success for us.)

Industries contribute to Ag-Ed in two ways - by organising and participating in their presentations and by providing us with information and feedback for the Teacher Resource Package, as previously acknowledged.

Presentations require thorough preparation. Meetings are held wherein representatives from each facet of an industry, eg. producer, DPI extension officer, grower organisations, discuss details of the presentation format, resources they will require, who the presenters will be. Sometimes Lee and I attend these meetings to advise and re-assure. To people not used to speaking to an audience, the thought of presenting can be quite daunting. Our message is to keep it simple, if possible refrain from the use of videos and slides, speak in a language the children can understand - no industry jargon or terminology - use references the children can relate to eg. if telling them how much a bull eats in one day, compare it in numbers of Weetbix. We discourage the handing out of stickers and paraphernalia and the use of gimmicks, in fact anything that will distract from the actual presentation. We suggest presentations can be interactive and allow for plenty of sensory explorations and hands on experiences, in other words concrete rather than abstract learning opportunities.

We recommend a minimum of two presenters to provide variety and a break for the person not talking. Ideally a presenter is someone who is dynamic, flexible, has loads of stamina, a sense of humour, thorough knowledge of the industry he/she is representing and an ability to establish a rapport with the ten different class groups to be encountered in one day.

Presenters who can deviate from a set script or presentation outline fare better than those who can't or won't. Often different class groups may have different expectations of presentations. They students may just want to ask questions, or they may wish to pursue a special interest in each industry, eg. the use of chemical sprays on cotton farms, and this highlights why flexibility is an important quality.

A second contributing factor to Ag-Ed's success is the recognition we have received from the Department of Education of Ag-Ed's credibility as an educational project. The very positive response from classroom teachers to Ag-Ed day and the Teacher Resource Package is further encouragement for us to keep the project alive and expanding. I will quote Mr Ken Rogers, our Regional Director of Education, who, upon visiting Ag-Ed this year made these two remarks in the context of his praise for the day: "four walls do not make a classroom" and "one day children will stop going to school because it interferes with their learning".

We have also approached officers at the Darling Downs Curriculum Centre for guidelines on writing curriculum - appropriate material for our Teacher Resource Package. They are very willing consultants, so much so that one officer wrote the entire landcare section for us!

Back to those good old classroom teachers - all teachers who attend Ag-Ed day are given an evaluation form to complete. Their comments are insightful and many are critical to the following year's planning. We pass on all their feedback of the presentations they attended to the relevant industry and if we feel it necessary, Lee and I discuss this feedback with the individuals concerned.

A third contribution to our success is the happy working relationship that Lee and I have farmed in working together. We share common philosophies and goals where Ag-Ed is concerned and have found that one's strengths balance the other's weaknesses. To this end, as coordinators of Ag-Ed, we have been able to establish sound administrative practices. Still, lots of mistakes happen and we have learned much from experience and trial and error. However, we have always managed to meet our deadlines (sometimes only by seconds) and our three Ag-Ed days have all run very smoothly.

Holding Ag-Ed in conjunction with the Toowoomba Show presents logistical problems such as allowing bus loads of children in through the gates, and once inside, moving them around the grounds.

Our vigilant show time gatekeepers take their jobs very seriously and are constantly on the look out for erstwhile free loaders, hence the necessity to provide each class group with a large brightly coloured Ag-Ed bus pass which identifies who they are. (If the teacher remembers), this is placed inside the bus window and assuming the bus arrives at the correct gate, permits hassle free entry. As the bus approaches the designated bus drop off zone, tour guides, one allocated to each class, prepare to meet their class. Tour guides and teachers both have kits containing a map of the showgrounds and a timetable, and on the assumption that two heads are better than one, can hopefully negotiate their class from site to site and keep on time.

For the 1995 and 1996 Ag-Ed days, our tour guides were students from Dalby Agricultural College. This year our guides were Year 10 and 11 Ag-Science students from Toowoomba Grammar School. The guide's role is to ensure their classes arrive at each of their presentations on time, as well as assisting class teachers as required. The Toowoomba Grammar School boys were marvellous and like the students from Emu Vale, admitted surprise at learning so much from the presentations they attended. They also learned a great deal about the time and motion management of children.

Lastly, the Royal Agricultural Society of Queensland (Toowoomba), the owners of Ag-Ed have of course provided a very supportive role. Every project has to have a beginning and it was the imagination of their Committee that saw all the components of and education program existing at various exhibitions.

General rural recessions have prevented direct funding support but Committee members' voluntary charitable fund raising efforts, including my family's manning, many many hamburger stalls, have provided much needed funds to cover basic costs such as printing, postage and telephone accounts. Both office and ground staff have been most helpful and obliging at all times. Committee and auxiliary members have been most encouraging.

CONCLUSION

Ag-Ed is continuing to grow, and as it does, Lee and I must commit more and more hours to its development. During its infancy, back in 1994, Lee and I were able to work at part time jobs, write resource material and coordinate Ag-Ed day. Halfway through 1995 we realised that we would have to resign from our jobs in order to devote full time working hours to Ag-Ed. Our commitment has paid off, though perhaps to our detriment. We have reached the stage where our limited funds and resources are all but depleted. Without funding, Ag-Ed's development is arrested and it remains a project that happens only as a part of the Toowoomba Show.

With funding, it can become an independent event, still at the Showgrounds, but lasting up to a week, and therefore able to be accessed by more students including students from further afield. The demand for these students is there, what is needed is the where-with-it-all to meet it.

With funding, Lee and I can facilitate a transportable working model of Ag-Ed. Again, the demand is there, from centres as far away from Toowoomba as Mt Isa and Perth.